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BAGHDAD FOR AMBASSADOR ERELI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/10/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [KISL](#) [BA](#)
SUBJECT: GOB WARNING TO OPPOSITIONISTS: EMPTY THREAT OR
BEGINNING OF A CRACKDOWN?

REF: A. 04 MANAMA 1482
[1](#)B. 07 MANAMA 96
[1](#)C. MANAMA 510
[1](#)D. MANAMA 742

Classified By: CDA Christopher P. Henzel for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The Minister of Interior threatened to enforce a long-disused law that would penalize the internationalization of sensitive domestic issues, such as the October briefing to the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. Several Shi'a opposition factions defied the warning and publicly pledged to continue such meetings. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Controversy escalated this week over three Shi'a activists' briefing October 15 to the U.S. Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC). Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa told local media November 6 that Bahraini oppositionists - including MPs - should be mindful of a long-unenforced law that appears to forbid contacts like the October 15 briefing. The law, a 1982 amendment to article 134 of Bahrain's 1976 penal code, stipulates a minimum imprisonment of 3 months and/or a minimum fine of BD 100 (USD 265) for attending foreign conferences, meetings, or briefings without prior permission from the government, or for discussing sensitive domestic matters with representatives of foreign governments or NGOs.

Shi'a Opposition Factions Call the Bluff

[1](#)3. (SBU) Key opposition factions were unmoved. Wifaq, the largest Shi'a political society, issued an immediate defense of its activities abroad and plans for further appeals to foreign governments and NGOs on human rights (ref D). Wifaq then joined with several smaller opposition societies on November 8 to issue a joint statement that called for the repeal of article 134. Local press reported that Wifaq leader Ali Salman said his party would propose a bill to amend article 134.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Bahrain Human Rights Society Secretary General Abdulla Alderazi told PolFSN that the human rights NGOs were incensed by the Interior Minister's statement, and generally planned to ignore it. Alderazi could not recall the last time the government had invoked this article of the penal code, but said it had used other portions of the penal code to arrest Haq leader Hasan Mushaima and Abdulhadi Al Khawaja for "inciting hatred" against the GOB. (Note: Al Khawaja was arrested in 2004 and again, this time with Mushaima, in 2007 for violation of penal code article 165, which criminalizes the "incitement of hatred" against the regime. He was convicted and immediately released in 2004, and didn't go to trial in 2007. For more information, see refs A & B. End Note.)

Bahrain's Liberals Weigh In

15. (SBU) By contrast, Hasan Al Dosari of the Mustaqbal bloc (4 elected MPs) joined Sunni Islamist MPs in calling for the King to dissolve parliament if Wifaq continued its "offenses against the Kingdom." (Mustaqbal bills itself to foreigners as the secular liberals of Bahrain's parliament, but its position on this controversy demonstrates - again - that they are Sunnis first, loyalists second, and liberals perhaps not so much.) Similarly, Sawsan Al Shaer, a (Sunni) secular editorialist whose television show was nearly cancelled when she insisted on no censorship, wrote a column in support of Sheikh Rashid that blasted Wifaq for not recognizing the liberal gains Bahrain has made. She asked rhetorically whose interest Wifaq was really working for.

16. (C) Comment: Sheikh Rashid's public warning does not seem very well thought out, and tracks with the whole Sunni community's neuralgic reaction to news of the Shi'a briefing to the CHRC. Now that the opposition societies have pledged to defy Sheikh Rashid, he will probably have to climb down. If he makes good on his threat, he will further polarize Bahrain's sects and do serious harm to Bahrain's international reputation. End Comment.

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